DIALOGUE WITH ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE (1853–6)

Some eighty letters survive from the correspondence between Gobineau and Tocqueville that began in 1843 and ended with the death of the latter in 1859. We present here some brief extracts concerning the racist theses of the Essay. *Though Tocqueville, the author of* Democracy in America, *had many fears about the coming age of mass politics, he strove pragmatically in all his writings to expound social doctrines that would minimize its potential evils. In the following exchanges we observe that Tocqueville, although impressed by Gobineau's genius, is horrified at his assertion of human inequality, at his fatalistic acceptance of present and future degeneration, at his neglect of any regenerative programme, and at the disastrous moral and practical consequences which his doctrines must have for the spirit of contemporaries. Gobineau's retort is that, as a purely scientific student of society, he is concerned with truth not practicality.*

TOCQUEVILLE TO GOBINEAU

October 11th, 1853

I have never concealed from you the fact that I am much prejudiced against what seems to be your fundamental idea – one which, I confess, appears to belong to the family of materialistic theories. It would even seem to be one of its most dangerous members, since it applies fatalism not simply to individuals but to those perennial groupings called *races*.

November 17th, 1853

Your doctrine is a kind of fatalism, of predestination if you wish ... You talk endlessly of races regenerating or degenerating, gaining or losing by an infusion of different blood certain social capacities not previously their own. I think that is how you put it. I must say frankly that, for me, such predestination seems closely related to pure materialism. Let me assure you that if the masses, whose reasoning always follows beaten tracks, accept your doctrine it will be extended immediately from races to individuals and from social capacities to all kinds of potentialities. Besides – whether fatalism be introduced into the material order or whether God willed the existence of various kinds of men so that some might be obliged, according to their race, to lack certain feelings, thoughts, habits and qualities that they might perceive but not possess – all this is scarcely relevant to my own concern with the practical consequences of different philosophical doctrines. Both these theories culminate in a vast limitation, even a complete abolition, of human liberty. Thus I confess that having read your book I remain, as before, extremely opposed to these doctrines. I believe that they are probably very false; I know that they are most certainly pernicious ...

... What advantage can there be in persuading base peoples living in barbarism, indolence or slavery that, such being their racial nature, they can do nothing to improve their situation or to change their habits and government? Do you not see inherent in your doctrine all the evils engendered by permanent inequality – pride, violence, scorn of fellow men, tyranny and abjection in all their forms? How can you speak to me, my dear friend, about the distinctions between *qualities which bring moral truths into operation* and what you call *social aptitude*? Are these

really different? When one has viewed for some time and at close quarters the workings of public affairs do you believe that one can avoid the conviction that the means to achieving success are identical with those in private life; that courage, energy, honesty, perspicacity and common sense are the real reasons behind the prosperity of empires as well as of families and that, in a phrase, the destiny of men, whether as individuals or as nations, is what they wish to make it?

... Please let us leave our discussion at this point. We are separated by a gulf too wide for this argument to be fruitful. There is an entire world of ideas between your beliefs and mine. I would therefore rather come to what I can praise without reservation ... In brief, let me say that this book is by far the most remarkable of your writings; that, in so far as I can judge, it reveals vast learning in the accumulation of so many facts, as well as great talent and rare insight in their marshalling. Those who approve of your fundamental thesis or who wish it to be true (and today, after sixty exhausting years of revolution, there are many in France who would aspire to have some such belief) must read it with real enthusiasm, since your book is well constructed and drives straight to its conclusion with much that is most pleasing to the intelligence. I proved sincere in criticism; please believe equally in the sincerity of my praise. Your work has great and genuine merit and it certainly puts you at the head of all those who have maintained such doctrines.

December 20th, 1853

You have taken up the very argument which has always seemed to me the most dangerous for our age ... The last century had an exaggerated and rather puerile confidence in the power of men and peoples over their own destiny.

It was the error of those times; a noble error, after all; even if it led to many follies, it also produced great things which posterity will see as dwarfing our own achievements. The fatigue of revolutions, the weakening of passions, the miscarriage of so many generous ideas and great hopes have now driven us to the opposite extreme. Once we thought that all could be transformed; now we believe ourselves incapable of any reformation. Once our pride was excessive; now we have fallen into a humility no less exaggerated. Once we believed we could do everything; today we think we can do nothing, regarding struggle and effort as henceforth useless and our blood, muscles and nerves as always stronger than our will and capabilities. This is truly the great sickness of our time. It is quite the reverse of that of our ancestors. In your book, however its arguments are organized, that sickness is encouraged not cured. Despite yourself, the work weakens still further the already lax spirit of your contemporaries.

GOBINEAU TO TOCQUEVILLE

October 15th, 1854

It is quite true that we no longer live in a very intellectual age and I well understand the disgust and annoyance which this realization inspires in you. But, as you say, my work is scarcely affected by this ... Since my methods of proof are exclusively scientific, I have come to discount any thought of popularity in a field which is so obviously outside the competence of most. Further, since I am so convinced that the present enfeeblement of mind is not only universal but also incurable, I have but one of two courses to follow: either to jump in a lake or else to carry on without the slightest concern for what is called public

opinion. Having decided upon the latter I care only for the few hundred minds still alive in the midst of the general atrophy.

March 20th, 1856

I am tormented by your constant reproach that I encourage the somnolence of those who are already only too drowsy. If I do so, then it is not through lullabies. If I corrupt, it is through acids not perfumes. Believe me, such is not the purpose of my book. I am not telling people 'You are acquitted' or 'You are condemned'. I am saying, 'You are dying. Far be it from me to pretend that you cannot conquer or be moved and agitated into spasmodic activity. Far be it from me either to encourage or to restrain. That does not concern me at all. But I am saying that you have passed the age of youth and have begun to reach that of decay. Your autumn is undoubtedly more vigorous than the decrepitude of the rest of the world, but it is autumn none the less. Winter is coming and descendants have you none. Establish kingdoms, great dynasties, republics, whatever you wish. To this I have no objection; all of it is possible. Go and torment the Chinese in their homeland, finish off Turkey, bring Persia within your sphere; all that is possible, even perhaps inevitable. I shall not contradict you, but, in the final account, the causes of your enervation are accumulating and will accumulate by these very actions and there is no longer anyone in the world to replace you when your degeneration is completed. The thirst for material enjoyment now tormenting you is a clear symptom – one as sure as the roseate cheeks of those who suffer from chest ailments. All civilizations in decay before you had it and, like you, they rejoiced in it. Having been sickened by the journalistic comments on this topic I never read them now. Well, is there anything

that I can do? By telling you what is happening and what will happen have I subtracted anything at all from your lifespan? I am no more a murderer than the doctor who announces that the end is at hand. If I am wrong, then of my four volumes nothing will remain. If I am right, then the facts will elude any desire to see them otherwise than as determined by the laws of nature.'

TOCQUEVILLE TO GOBINEAU

July 30th, 1856

You know that I can in no way reconcile myself to your doctrine. My view is so obsessive on this point that the very reasons you give in substantiation of your case increasingly confirm me in an opposition which only remains concealed because of my affection for you. You compare yourself to a doctor who announces to his patient that he is mortally ill and you ask what is immoral in that. My retort is that this act, if it is not immoral in itself, can only have consequences both immoral and pernicious. If one morning my doctor came and said, 'My dear sir, I am honoured to announce that you are mortally ill and, because this affects the most vital organs, I may also add that there is absolutely no chance of any kind of recovery', I should be tempted first to hit him. Next, I would see nothing else for it other than to put my head beneath the covers and await the predicted outcome – unless of course I had the temper which animated Boccaccio during the Florentine plague and thus, burning the candle at both ends, would abandon myself effortlessly to all my pleasures whilst awaiting the inevitable conclusion. Again, I could take advantage of the death sentence to prepare myself for eternal life. But for societies there is no everlasting life.

Thus your doctor will not count me among his patients. I would add that doctors, like philosophers, are frequently wrong in their prognostications. More than once I have seen such condemned men subsequently recovering and reproaching their doctors with having needlessly frightened and discouraged them. You will see, my dear friend, that while greatly disposed to admit your talents as an author I cannot accept the validity of your ideas.